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The Escorial
A Prize Poem

By
J.A. Symonds

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THE ESCORIAL.

A PRIZE POEM,

RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 20, 1860.

BY

J. A. SYMONDS,

BALL. COLL.



OXFORD:

T. AND G. SHRIMPTON, BROAD STREET,

MDCCCLX.

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THE ESCORIAL.



WATCHING from Guadarrama's iron steep
The tardy morn along the valley creep,
Robed with dark pines I saw beneath me spread
Escorial's cloistered palace of the dead.
Deep in that dark which ushers in the day
The sombre piles of ashy granite lay,
And swelled by mists that from the valley steamed
Like Brocken's ghost, a giant phantom seemed.

Lorn and forsaken on the quarried waste,
Her pride dishonoured, and her pomp effaced;
Yet does her front unscathed with scorn defy
Time's wasting hand: she bears her crown as high

As when those massive basements first were set,
Those vast arcades and cloisters arched with jet.
Perchance some ghastlier horror creeps and clings
Round gates which guard the sepulchre of kings;
With harsher moan the rusty hinges call,
And hollower echoes wake the vacant hall:
For now the shrines, the palace courts are still—
No sounds of banquet through their chambers thrill:
Round nave and choir no full-voiced organs sweep,
No black-stoled monks their holy vigils keep.
Yet, though the dust of ages drape her thrones,
Though ruin scowl above her cold grey stones,
Though shattered shrines and ravaged pomp betray
The Frenchman's rage^a, the vengeance of Houssaye:
Still wintry storms unheeded vex her crown,
From barren ridge and snow-field eddying down;
The splash of rain, the rending thunder shock
Alike in vain assail her stubborn rock:
Like some proud Queen of robe and circlet spoiled,
She grimly smiles and mocks her conqueror foiled.

^a The French sacked the Escorial.

Thus as I mused, from Eastern gates the sky
Flushed into purple, for the sun was nigh.
On clear cut angles floods of glory stole,
Round each swart tower flamed forth its aureole :
In sudden light the mass transfigured seemed
Radiant with beauty from the Past redeemed :
Then, as my gaze roved o'er the brightening plain,
Fancy sped forth o'er Memory's darker reign—
Pierced through the gloom that o'er Espagna lowers,
Revived her buried kings and built again her towers.

Methought once more " the noiseless fabric grew " ^b
As grows some cloud o'er evening's sultry blue :
Once more from yon rough seat the monarch bent ^c
Year after year on baffled hopes intent :
He, o'er whose realm ne'er set the lamp of day,
Imploring mourned a servant's slow delay ^d—

^b The Escorial, like Solomon's Temple, was built of stone cut far off.

^c Philip used to sit and watch the building from a rock in the hills that overlook Escorial.

^d Besides many other delays, the Italian artist Leoni retarded the sculptures of Escorial's chapel for many years, in his workshop. It was finally not completed till shortly before Philip's death, and at the close of his power.

He, at whose nod five kingdoms bowed in fear,
Watched vainly on till shame and death were near.

Mark that spare form—the small and restless eye,
Grey as the morn, and cold as winter's sky :
The low broad brow ploughed deep with hate and scorn,
By cloistral pangs and jealous passion worn :
His hollow cheek by penance blanched and lust—
Lips loose with fear, or quivering with mistrust :
Slave to himself—a zealot's heart is there,
'Neath bright cuirass and princely minivere.
More fit is he, in cowl and russet serge,
On altar steps to wield the bleeding scourge ;
Than from Spain's sovran throne the world to sway,
Or turn the flight on some disastrous day :
The martyrs' shrieks, the stake's infernal glow,
Those his alarum, this his bridal show*.

See him once more, by marshy Somme's slow tide :—
Clenched the white lips, and tamed his glance of pride.

* He welcomed his bride at Toledo with an *auto da fé*.

While war's red thunder rolls to Quentin's wall,
While crumbling towers and flaming temples fall,
Let Egmont's heat and Savoy's stern command
Drive the quick siege and launch the furious band—
Far from the fight will Philip storm the skies^f,
Stayed by two priests, with prayer and coward cries.
Forsooth the saint resents his shattered fane^g,
And turns war's tide against presumptuous Spain,—
Then vows the king—if Laurence deign to smile—
A fabric statelier than the shrines of Nile;
At once a marvel for all years to come,
And symbol of its patron's martyrdom.

.

The royal word goes forth: O'er Western seas
Speed your rich freight, broad-breasted argosies:
Let far Peruvian mines disgorge their gold,
Tear the pale gems from Ocean's azure hold:
Let bright-veined woods and odorous spice be borne,
From isles that sparkle in the rising morn.

^f Philip was not on the field of St. Quentin's battle. He waited and prayed at some distance.

^g The legend is that in storming St. Quentin it was necessary to destroy a chapel of St. Lawrence: to avert his wrath Philip vowed the Escorial.

Earth's utmost realms their fairest dowers combine,
And Art with Nature vies to deck the shrine.
Round bleak Madrid resounds the granite blow,
Carrara's marbles yield their frozen snow :
By clear Xarama falls the monarch oak,
The Vega's pines throw back the woodman's stroke :
Famed Flemish looms their glossiest arras spread,
And Spain's veiled sisters ply the votive thread.

The word goes forth : Toledo bowed his skill^h,
And shackled Art to serve the royal will.
Lo! in deep court, in tower, and long arcade,
Grim bars of torture hideously portrayedⁱ :
The dull dark granite speaks in imaged woe,
While Fancy sees the Martyr's fire-bed glow.
Strange that a legend born of phantom fear,
To please a king should cast its shadow here !
Cells, halls, and altars own the sovran gloom—
A palace part, but more a convent tomb.

^h "Toledo," the architect of Escorial. Some ascribe its plans to "Herrera," by whom they were carried out.

ⁱ St. Laurence was burned on a gridiron. Philip ordered the Escorial to be built in that shape.

No place is here for scroll of fruit or stem,
For Gothic fret, or Moorish diadem :
Tall Doric shafts the frescoed vault sustain,
Pure in their concord, in their beauty plain.
To gild their pomp no bright mosaics blaze ;
Awful they tower, and daunt the quailing gaze :
Save where the altar rears its jewelled height,
Funereal marbles spread continuous night.

These were thy days of triumph, lonely Queen,
Now the bare mistress of the bleak ravine.
Days when proud Rome and haughty Florence brought
The priceless offering of a limner's thought.
In that blest time, great Titian's hand for thee,
In living tints called forth Antiopé :—
She mid cool grass sleeps watched by rosy love—
That Faun's rough forehead veils the thunderer Jove.

And soon thy walls with Raphael's hues shall beam,
The English "Pearl" in Jerome's cloister gleam¹:

¹ Raphael's Madonna, called by Philip IV. "the Pearl" of his paintings, after he had brought it from the English Parliament, on the death of Charles I.

A gentle group : far off the day's decline
Streaks violet eve with many a rosy line ;
Mid grassy stones two mothers bend to see
The holy infants sporting at their knee.
Or, with meek eyes, and angel-lifted hands ^k,
Holding the charm'd fish, Tobias stands ;
From Mary's lap the Infant turns to look—
His finger rests on Jerome's open book.
Or, spurned by soldiers, on the stony road ^l,
The Saviour fails beneath His cruel load ;
Still as He pants and vainly seeks to rise,
On Judah's daughters rest His pitying eyes.

Now all is o'er : from off thy mouldy walls,
For years forgot, the fresco curls and falls :
And Spain's own gems from many a darksome room ^m
Are idly rolled to meet a baser doom :—
Morales' woe, Ribera's gory dread,
And all the grace which mild Murillo shed ;

^k Raphael's Madonna "del Pesce."

^l Raphael's "Lo Spasimo di Siellia."

^m Vast numbers of pictures have been entirely neglected, or are only brought out to be repainted and spoiled.

Kings that from old Velasquez' canvass stride,
Monks by dark Zurbaran in trance descried.

Throw wide thy portals, huge half-shapen mass,
Like Milton's Hell-gates, let thy monarch pass :
Chaos of hopes—thy walls as bare and bleak
As the vain dreams that blanch his wasted cheek !
For Philip comes : let Jerome's monks prepare
No fast or scourge, no mockery of prayer.
Mid thoughts like these what need forced watch to keep?
Rage and Remorse will lash him e'en in sleep.
Spain's heir lies dead—the fault he best can know,
Whose “ smile but heralds the swift dagger's blow ” :
He best, who swore to fan the pious flames,
Should Carlos doubt what holy Church proclaims°.
Go friendless king, perchance e'en thou may'st feel
Through Jerome's vaults thy child's pale presence steal :
While censers smoke, and anthems seek the skies.
From towers that tell thy pompous sacrifice,

ⁿ See Cabrera Filipe Segundo, vii. 22.

^o Philip is said to have boasted that he would burn his own son were he heretic.

Still on thy soul must brood crime's nightmare dread—
Those walls thou buildest are but for thy dead.

Three months have flown : a nation's wail once more
Thrills from Bayonne to Cadiz' sunset shore :
Fresh, fair, and gay, in beauty's April bloom
Spain's olive branch hath sickened to the tomb^r.
Dead is thine heir : thy queen shall soon be laid
By his chill ashes in Escorial's shade :
Though on their love was cast thy passion's blight,
Whom death hath joined, thou canst not disunite.

Hence to thy work : each sullen province drain
To deck thy shrine—that "ulcer spot of Spain."
Though armies clamour mutinous for pay,
Though forts and cities crumble to decay,
Stint thy broad realms, on monkish cells to pour
Half Europe's wealth, the West's unmeasured store.

^r "Olive branch." So the Spaniards called Isabella of France, Philip's second wife, and once the betrothed of Carlos.

Here, rapt in orisons, impassive greet
Venetia's herald of thy victor fleet^a :
Rise from thy vespers, and with sullen air
Bid loud Te Deums take the place of prayer.
Here too, once more as passionless, await
News of thy lost ill-named Armada's fate :
While English bells and bonfires chase the night,
Hailing their Queen whose God defends the right,
Through Spain's grey domes the muffled peals shall toll,
From lip to lip thy vassals' curses roll.
Thou, in thy fane, meanwhile, unmoved must bear
Thine own disgrace, thy multitude's despair :
'T is well thy features show no quivering line—
What lip would writhe, what tear would fall with thine ?

Still through long years, through loss and failure still,
Bend o'er thy task and haunt thy lonely hill.
At last the work is done : complete it stands,
And lowers with baleful shadow o'er thy lands.

^a The victory of Lepanto was announced by a Venetian to Philip, at evening service.

Once more throw wide the gate—that gate that swings
But for the chariot or the hearse of kings.
Pass the crowned shapes thou ne'er shalt pass again:
Robe them with palls: King Death is of thy train.

High swing the censers: shall the organ roll
Its angry cadence on that passing soul^r?
Or in soft harmonies of mournful song
Through the grim vaults a requiem prolong?
What sees the glazing eye in that vast gloom?
The altar glitters with his destined tomb:
Long lines of sombre columns point the way
To mocking splendours piled above decay.
Yes! that sweet voice that dies and soars again,
Now high in heaven, now sunk to softest strain,
Ill suits that voice of song the gasping breath,
Cold falls its pathos on the ear of death.

Clasp to thy breast, poor king, our Lady's veil:
Perchance 't will hide the Past's remorseful tale.

^r Philip died in the chapel of Escorial, clasping the veil of our Lady of Montserrat.

Lift to the sculptured cross thy faltering eyes :
Climb—if such soul as thine can climb—the skies.
This is thy place of penance, this thy vow :
These walls, forsooth, thy pious vigils know.
Dream that St. Laurence, piercing death's dark night,
Will own his debt, and lead thee to the light.

Go view his tomb : here—while with ceaseless shriek
The shrill winds rave round Guadarrama's peak—
Here the same winds to solemn whispers fall,
And seem to breathe of that grim funeral.
Here sleep the dead, their course of glory run,
Like pageant princes when the play is done.

What though the pile rears high its front of pride,
Spreads its vast courts, and flings its portals wide—
Still from its cold bare walls and naked cells
The humbling tale of blighted pomp it tells—
Tells of the sad vicissitude of things,
A kingly pile forsaken of its kings,
Tells with unbroken arch, unmouldering stone,
A monarch's barren vow, a nation's pride o'erthrown.



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